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Intensifiers in Persian Discourse: Apology and Compliment Speech Acts in Focus

Samira Ghanbaran[a,] *, Meisam Rahimi[b], Abbas Eslami Rasekh[c]

[a, b, c]*Department of English Language and Literature, University of Isfahan, Iran*

Abstract

Speech carries, in addition to its propositional meaning, the functional intentions of the speaker (illocution). Persian language is governed by norms the realization of which makes significant cross-cultural differences. This study is an attempt to investigate the proportion by which intensifiers are used in the two speech acts of apology and compliment. More specifically, it tries to investigate how using intensifiers ensures the desirable level of appropriateness for Persian speakers and, generally speaking, why they are used in that proportion. Moreover, it tries to find out whether gender tends to affect the differential degrees of use of intensifiers. To this end, Persian apologetic and compliment utterances were collected through interview as well as eliciting Discourse Completion Test (DCT) data. The findings of the analysis reveal that Persian speakers use intensifiers extensively in both apology and compliment speech acts. Significant differences are also observed in the type, frequency, and illocutionary effect of using intensifiers in apology and compliment speech acts. The interview data show that Persian participants believe they are concerned about the illocutionary effect of their speech acts in order to make sure that face has been sufficiently served in apology. In compliments, intensifiers are used in a typical sense to show the illocutionary force of the speaker's act. Intensifiers are also used differently across genders: female speakers show greater tendency to use intensifiers than male speakers.

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Keywords: intensifier; discourse; speech act; illocutionary force

1. Introduction

While speech acts operate based on universal pragmatic principles (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975; Leech, 1983), there are some differences in their conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985). If claims for these universal pragmatic principles are to approximate validity, extensive empirical investigation on various languages is required (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98 09132067381; fax: +98 03116697161.
E-mail address: sandra_11437@yahoo.com

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Apology is offered when someone causes harm or discomfort on someone else. In other words, apologizing is a strategy for restoring the relationship between participants (Leech, 1983). This strategy is mostly applied through some words. As another speech act, compliment explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed (Holmes, 1986). In these two frequently used speech acts speakers try to satisfy the listener in order to have a successful communication.

Intensifier is a linguistic term which refers to modifiers, like *very*, *really*, and *extremely*, which, in fact, intensify another word. Intensifiers contribute to maximizing the effect of apology and compliment speech acts.

2. Background

2.1. Apology

Apology is viewed as a remedial interchange which changes the meaning function given into an act, transforming an offensive statement into an acceptable one (Goffman, 1971). Whenever the speaker violates the social norms and hurts someone's face naturally there's a need for the speaker to apologize.

Studies in Israel (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) and Wolfson, Marmor, and Johns' (1989) research on the performance of apologies across cultures provided an empirical basis for describing apologies. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) believe that speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles. Green (1975) and Wierzbicka (1985) claim for the existence of possible variations in verbalization and conceptualization across languages. Considering the fact that the majority of the related studies were concentrated on western cultures, Blum-kulka et al. (1989) mentioned the need for a movement from western languages to non-western languages and cultures.

Many studies on apology across various languages and cultures have been conducted, such as the following: In American English (Wolfson et al., 1989; Bean & Johnstone, 1994), New Zealand English (Holmes, 1989, 1990), British English (Aijmer, 1995, 1996; Deutschmann, 2003), German (Vollmer & Olshtaion, 1989), Japanese (Ide, 1998), Jordanian (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006), and Persian (Afghari, 2007; Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

Persian studies have mostly focused on apology strategies used by Persian speakers and their preferences for these strategies in different contexts. These studies show that Persian apologies were pragmatically formulaic as in English (Afghari, 2007; Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

In 1982 the project of Cross -Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) was initiated (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) to analyze speech acts across different languages and cultures in order to investigate the existence of any possible pragmatic universals and their characteristics. According to CCSARP coding scheme, the act of apologizing can linguistically take the form of any of the five below strategies:

1. An expression of apology (IFID)
   - i. An expression of regret, e.g. I'm sorry
   - ii. An offer of apology, e.g. I apologize
   - iii. A request for forgiveness, e.g. forgive me
2. An explanation or account of the situation (EXPL), e.g. The bus was late
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility (RESP)
   - i. Accepting the blame, e.g. It was my fault.
   - ii. Expressing self-deficiency, e.g. I was confused.
   - iii. Recognizing the other person as deserving apology, e.g. you are right.
   - iv. Expressing lack of intent, e.g. I didn't mean to….
4. An offer of repair (REPR), e.g. I'll help you get up.
5. A promise of forbearance, e.g. It won't happen again.

2.2. Compliment

Compliments are considered as one of the speech acts which explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good possession, characteristics, skill, etc. which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer (Holmes, 1988). Complimenting has the potential to show gratitude, open or close a conversation, or even soften a criticism or request (Billmyer, 1990).

Some studies have compared different feature of compliment and compliment response across native and non-native English speakers (Chen, 1993; Chiang & Pochtrager, 1993). Most of the studies have been carried out to compare Compliment Responses (CR) in different languages and cultures. Golato (2002) discovered that there are some similarities and differences across languages. In her study, American English speakers differed from Germans in terms of their agreement sequences in Compliment Responses. The study reported that Germans agree or accept compliments without thanking as a compliment response. Darikuhara's (1986) study analyzed compliment and compliment responses within a group of Japanese and American English interlocutors. It was found that Japanese speakers prefer to downplay the compliment or accept it in much the same way as American speakers do, employing" thank you" after a compliment. Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) reported on the similarities and differences between Syrian Arabic and American English compliment responses. Results suggested that the speakers in both cultures are more likely to accept or mitigate the complimentary force than to reject it. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) in a cross-cultural study compared compliment responses in British English and Spanish. Al Falasi (2007) investigated how female Arab learners of English produced target-like compliment responses in English. She concluded that female Arab learners transferred L1 compliment expressions and strategies to target language. Heidari, Rezazadeh and Eslami Rasekh (2009) conduct a gender based study on Iranian EFL learners and showed that females preferred using evade and reject strategies. Bu (2010) has reported on pragmatic transfer in the use of compliment response strategies by Chinese EFL learners. Sakirgil and cubukcu (2012) compared formulas and topics in English and Turkish and classification of topics according to possession, appearance, performance, attribute and skill. In a recent study, Allami and Montazeri (2012) examined the knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in responding to compliments in English, focusing on gender, age and educational background variables. The result of this study indicated that the three most frequent compliment response categories were acceptance, positive elaboration and neutral elaboration. Since compliments show societal values, the area of acceptance and compliment topics have triggered many studies across different languages (Wolfson, 1983, 1989; Knapp, Hopper & Bell, 1984; Daikuhara, 1986; Holmes, 1986, 1988, 1995; Wang & Tsai, 2003; Yu, 2005).

Boori (1994), based on an analysis of a corpus including 838 Persian compliment events, found that there are only two syntactic patterns for Persian compliments: NP + ADJ/ADV + V *šomā xeyli mehrabān hastid* (you are very kind), NP + ADJ + (V)! *che kif-e xub-i!* (What a nice bag!).

Compliments can be categorized into two general groups of explicit and implicit. Explicit compliments are generally direct and unambiguous positive remarks that contain at least one positive semantic carrier (Yuan, 2002; Yu, 2005). On the other hand, implicit compliments, without a positive lexical item at the level of linguistic form (Yu, 2005), require more inferences from the addressee to reconstruct the implicated meaning (Yu, 2005). For example, in the expression *what a nice handbag! I like to buy one for my sister*: The first part (what a nice handbag) is considered an explicit compliment while the second part (I like to buy it for my sister) is an implicit compliment.

2.3. Intensifier

The importance of intensification in communication is due to the role it plays as a vehicle for praising, impressing, insulting, persuading and generally influencing the listener’s reception of the message (Partington, 1993). Intensifiers are used as a general term for degree words or degree modifiers which serve to show degree or exact value of the quality of the item they modify (Mendez-Naya, 2008).

Intensification is a pervasive function in language. Intensifiers, such as the traditionally-termed degree adverbs (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999), do not always intensify the word meanings. Each intensifier can indicate a relatively low or high point on a scale, from minimum intensity like *hardly* to maximum intensity as *absolutely* (Quirk et al., 1985). Quirk et al (1985) classified intensifiers into the following subcategories:

1. Amplifiers

a) Maximizers as *completely, absolutely*
b) Boosters as *very, highly*

2. Downtoners
   a) Approximators as *nearly, virtually*
   b) Compromisers as *fairly, quite*
   c) Diminishers as *slightly*
   d) Minimizers as *hardly, scarcely*

According to this categorization amplifiers are used to increase the meaning conveyed by relevant words, while downtoners decrease the meaning conveyed. Both Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (1999) refer to these elements as adverbs of degree. The semantic distinction between maximizers and boosters is due to the fact that maximizers usually modify 'non-gradable' words or items that already convey an idea of 'extreme' like *repugnant* while boosters are used with gradable words like *nice* and *ugly*.

Intensifiers have been the focus of different studies over the past years because of their capacity to influence communication and their linguistic developments (Mendez-Naya, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010). Abundant standard grammars and textbooks on linguistics reveal the productive nature of intensification grammar in relation to lexical and semantic change (e.g. Pyles & Algeo, 1993; Quirk et al., 1985). Gonzálezdíaz (2008) focused on recent development on *very much* as an English intensifier. Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani (2010) measured the application of intensifying devices in apology speech act of Persian EFL learners. The results showed that the explicit teaching group used intensifiers more appropriately.

Most of the studies on intensifiers focus on the frequency of intensifiers in specific languages or changes of intensifiers functions. Anderson (2006) studied intensifiers in The Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (SCOTS). Macaulay (2006) deals with the appearance of an unusual intensifier "*pure*" in the speech of adolescents in Glasgow, Scotland. Afghari (2007) investigated the effect of values assigned to two variables of social distance and social dominance on the frequency of apology intensifiers. The list of intensifiers proposed by Afghari (2007) for the apology speech act, including CCSARP's internal intensifiers scheme, is used in this study:

a. Intensifying adverbials, e.g. I'm very sorry.
b. Emotional expressions, e.g. Oh God.
c. Double intensifier, e.g. I'm very very sorry.
d. The word ''Please'', e.g. please, forgive me.
e. Hope for forgiveness, e.g. I hope you'd forgive me.
f. Swearing, e.g. I swear I forget.

The first four (a, b, c, d) are shared by CCSARP and the last two are introduced by Afghari in his research on Persian apology intensifiers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Fifty males and females (25 males and 25 females) participated in this study. The range of participants' age was from 20 to 50. The participants were all native Persian speakers with various educational levels (secondary diploma, bachelor or master).

3.2. Instruments

The data for both apology and compliment speech acts was collected through two Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), using a controlled elicitation method called open questionnaire. The tests are in fact a modified version of ''Discourse Completion Test'' (DCT) used in CCSARP project Blum-Kulka (1982) and Afghari (2007). These tests consisted of 12 fixed discourse situations which a person is likely to encounter in his/her daily life. In all situations, a brief description of the addressee's characteristics is provided to impose two context-external factors of social dominance (the relative degree of the social power of the interlocutors over each other) and social distance (degree of familiarity between the interlocutors).

Table 1
The matrix of context-external factors

items	Social dominance	Social distance
3&8	-	+
5&9 hearer dominance 7&12 speaker dominance	+	+
6&1	-	-
4&10 speaker dominance 2&11 hearer dominance	+	-

In the two DCTs, two items were provided for each of the above situations, hence a total number of 12 questions for each DCT (Appendix A).

3.3. Procedure

As was mentioned before, the data was gathered through two DCTs, one DCT for each speech act. The participants were presented with the two DCTs and were required to imagine the situation for each item and write exactly what they would naturally say in that particular situation.

As the raw data was gathered, the answers were read carefully and the intensifiers used, based on the scale proposed by Afghari (2007) (see section 2.3), were identified. Based on the data obtained, another type of utterance was added to the scale "address term". Finally, the data was analyzed using SPSS 19.0.

4. Results

The data collected were analyzed based on the two major context-external factors, namely social dominance and social power (see section 3.2).

4.1. Apology

According to the result represented in figure (1), females have used more intensifiers (6.56) than males (5.16).
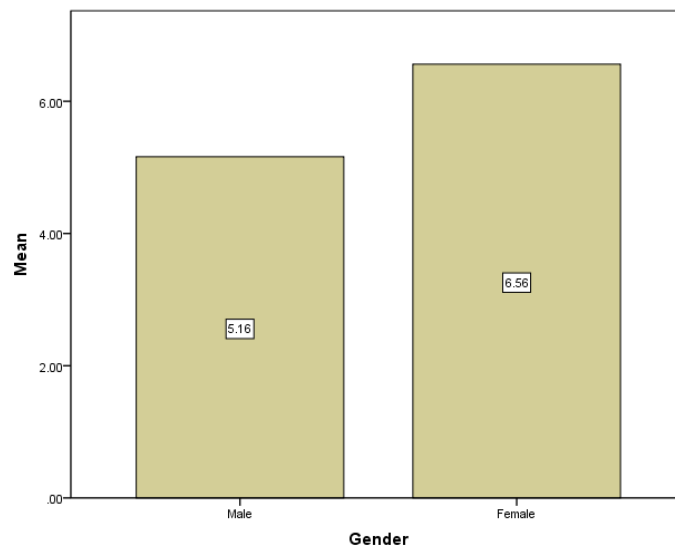
Figure 1
The mean distribution of intensifiers in apology speech act across genders

A t-test was conducted to see whether the observed difference was significant or not: t(47.513) = -1.496, p = 0.141. As the result of the t-test shows, the difference between males and females is not significant.

The performance of the participants was also analyzed across the various social situations for both males and females (see table 1). Figure 2 represents the result of this analysis.
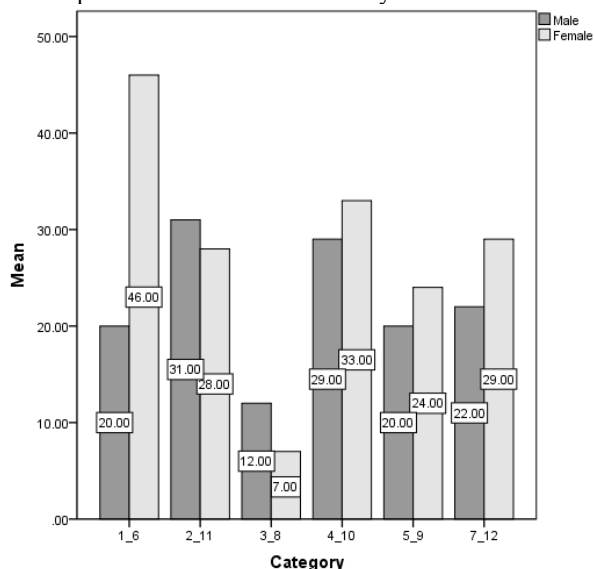
Figure 2
The mean distribution of intensifiers in apology speech act in various social situations for both males and females

As the results in the above figure show, females have used more intensifiers in situation 1-6 with the mean frequency of 46 where neither social distance nor social dominance existed. On the other hand, males have had a tendency to use more intensifiers in situation 2-11 where the interlocutors know each other (- distance) and hearer has some kind of dominance over the speaker.

In order to see whether the observed differences in the performance of the males and females were significant or not, a number of t-tests were applied. The results were not significant in all situations except situation 1-6: t(48) = -3.514, p = 0.001.

4.2. Compliment

The complement speech act was analyzed in the same way as the apology speech act. As the result in figure 3 shows, female speakers have used more intensifiers in their compliments (8.16) than males (5.80). The result of the t-test conducted to see whether the difference between males and females was significant shows that a meaningful difference exists across the two genders: t(48) = -2.619, p = 0.012.
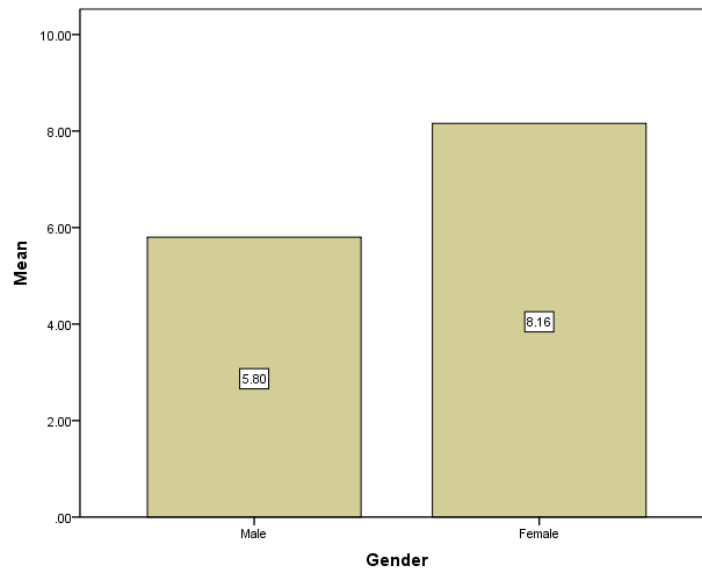
Figure 3
The mean distribution of intensifiers in compliment speech act across genders

Figure 4 represents the use of intensifiers in various social situations by both males and females. T-tests were conducted to identify the significant differences. The results of the t-tests show that the intensifiers use by females has been more and significantly different in the following situations: 5-9 (t(48) = -2.213, p = 0.32), 7-12 (t(48) = -2.724, p = 0.009), and 1-6 (t(48) = -2.116, p = 0.04).
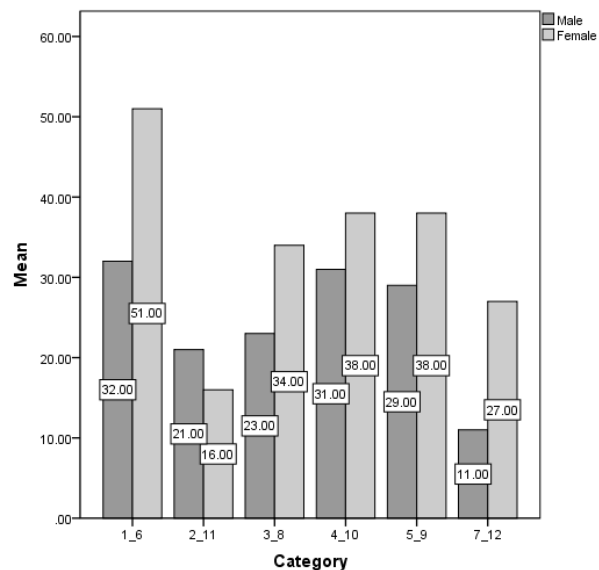
Figure 4
The mean distribution of intensifiers in compliment speech act in various social situations for both males and females

5. Discussion

5.1. Apology

Although females used more intensifiers in apology, the difference was not significant between males and females. As discussed before, the DCT questionnaire designed and administered in this study consisted of 12 situations for each speech act, constructed on the basis of the two context-external factors of social distance and dominance between interlocutors. Situation 1 and 6 are similar because the interlocutors are familiar together (-distance) and none has power or dominance over the other (-dominance).

The highest mean frequency in apology is in situation 1-6 for female speakers and situation 2-11 for male speakers. In other words, the highest number of intensifiers in females has been used while communicating close friends without any social distance and social dominance. Females have used a higher level of intensifiers to maintain their friendship and the level of intimacy. For males this highest level occurs in the situation where the interlocutors know each other (- distance) and the addressee has dominance over the speaker (+ H dominance).

In Persian culture, male speakers are generally considered to be the dominant group. Consequently, as a male speaker causes discomfort to another male in a higher social position, they would try to mend the relationship using intensifiers.

The lowest level of intensification is related to situations 3 and 8 for both males and females. In these situations, the interlocutors hardly know each other (+ distance) and none of them has dominance over the other (-dominance).

5.2. Compliment

As the results of the t-test between the performance of males and females indicated (see section 3.4.2), there existed a significant difference across genders regarding their performance in compliments, where females (8.16) used more intensifiers than males (5.80). As was mentioned before, in Persian culture, males are generally considered the dominant group in society. In order to fill this social gap and fade this dominance, females have used a larger number of intensifiers. Another reason for using more intensifiers by females can be females' lack of self-confidence. The highest mean frequency of intensifiers in compliments is in situation 1-6 for both males and females, where the interlocutors are close to each other (-social distance) and none of them has dominance over the other.

The least frequent situations for males are 2-11 and 7-12 but in females are 7-12 and 2-11. These situations overlap in terms of the existence of social dominance and specifically, speakers' dominance. It means that, in Persian, the speaker's superiority over the hearer causes the least of intensifiers use.

6. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to figure out cultural norms of Persian society as a non-western culture because most of the sociopragmatic studies on intensifiers were restricted geographically and culturally to western societies and cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

The findings of this study indicate that Persian speakers tend to use different frequencies of intensifiers across genders. Generally speaking, female speakers used more intensifiers than male speakers in both apology and compliment speech acts. In apology, male speakers used 44.5 % intensifiers while female speakers used 55.4%. In compliment speech act, females used 58.1 % intensifiers and males used 41.8 %. The t-test showed a significant difference between these two groups.

The investigation of the possible effects of the two context-external variables, namely the social distance and dominance, on the frequency of intensifiers in the two speech acts revealed that the most intensified apologies in female were among close friends without any dominance (situation 1 -6), confirming the result of the study by

Afghari (2007), and in males among familiar interlocutors with addressee dominance (situation 2-11). The least intensified situation among male and female in apology was 3-8 where no dominance existed (-social dominance) and interlocutors were not familiar (+ social distance). The analysis of the data revealed that intensifiers were used most frequently in situation 1-6 across genders.

As mentioned earlier, the present study was based on the data gathered through Discourse Completion Test (DCT). That would be more desirable if the data was collected through the natural spontaneous communication of interlocutors. Moreover, further research can include other independent factors (e.g. age and level of education) in data analysis.

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